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ABSTRACT

The At-Risk Children and Youth Task Force in North Carolina has spent almost a year grappling with the many and complex problems of at-risk children and youth. Presented are the recommendations of the task force. The recommendations are based on hours of indepth interviews, hours of reading, and time spent listening to parents, educators, and representatives from public agencies, communities, and businesses at the At-Risk Children and Youth Statewide Forum. These recommendations cover a wide range of issues: (1) educational needs of at-risk children and youth; (2) other needs of at-risk children and youth and their families; and (3) community support of at-risk children and youth. (SI)

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Bob Etheridge, State Superintendent of Public Instruction • North Carolina Department of Public Instruction

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North Carolina Department of Public Instruction
Bob Etheridge, Superintendent

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The material in this project was prepared under Grant No. 99-8-3439-98-005-02 from the Employment and Training Administration, U.S. Department of Labor, under the authority of the Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA). Grantees undertaking such projects under Government sponsorship are encouraged to express freely their professional judgment. Therefore, points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent the official position or policy of the Department of Labor.

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Preface

No North Carolina child can be forgotten or his or her quality of life taken for granted. Yet that is precisely what is happening each year as more than 120 school children disappear daily from our public schools. Who are these children? What are they doing? And how did this happen? They are anyone's children, but they are mostly ours. Yes, many of them do live in poverty, have undereducated parents, and are minority. But many of them do not live in poverty, have educated parents, and are not minority. Some of them are leaving school to care for their own children; others are working to pay for cars or to feed younger brothers and sisters. Some are even less fortunate, for they have become victims of drugs or alcohol. And then there are those who have no such serious problems; they do not know what they want, but it isn't school. You see, many just never fit in and no one seems to care--in fact, most of their classmates don't even know their names and don't even know they aren't around anymore.

To answer the question "How did this happen?," we must look at both the educational system and the children. There is basically one system and, fortunately, it works well for most children. But unfortunately, not all children come to us with the same backgrounds and experiences. For those children whose lives are more complicated than most or whose needs are more serious than most, the system often fails or falls quite short. The cost of failing to meet the needs of more than 25 percent of our children is an expense we cannot afford--not economically or in terms of human decency.

The At-Risk Children and Youth Task Force has spent almost a year grappling with the many and complex problems of at-risk children and youth. Herein are the recommendations of the Task Force--recommendations based on hours of in-depth interviews, hours of reading, and time spent listening to parents, educators, and representatives from public agencies, communities, and businesses at the At-Risk Children and Youth Statewide Forum. These recommendations cover a wide range of issues; implementation of them will involve policy decisions, legislation, and the commitment of each of us to be accountable for what continues to happen to children in North Carolina. I want to express my personal thanks to the Task Force, and I commit to do my part to advance these recommendations into reality. The power to improve the lives of children rests not with the children themselves, but with you and me.

Bob Etheridge

Superintendent of Public Instruction

Acknowledgement

The Department of Public Instruction gratefully acknowledges the time and effort contributed by the At-Risk Children and Youth Task Force during the past year to prepare a blueprint for action on behalf of at-risk children and youth. To ensure success, this blueprint demands the cooperation and commitment of educators, businesses, and communities.

For their endless hours of work and dedication, our sincere thanks to the following Task Force members:

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Introduction

In April 1988, the Council of Chief State School Officers awarded competitive grants to eleven states to initiate activities leading to legislative and/or policy proposals to guarantee appropriate educational and related services for at-risk children and youth. Through the efforts of the Support Services Area of the Department of Public Instruction, North Carolina was one of the eleven recipients.

The goal of the North Carolina project is to initiate efforts that will lead to formal state agency and/or General Assembly action to ensure that the needs of at-risk children and youth are met. To support this goal, a twelve-member At-Risk Children and Youth Task Force, including representatives from the North Carolina General Assembly, local school systems, state agencies, the judicial system, the business community, higher education, and a parents' group, was appointed to serve as the nucleus of the project.

Activities led by the Task Force have focused on receiving information and ideas on the issues concerning at-risk children and youth from experts, professionals, and other concerned citizens working with or on behalf of these children. These activities have included:

- presentations from educators, public agency representatives, at-risk youth, and researchers;
- a survey of educators and representatives from public agencies serving the at-risk population; and
- a statewide forum for final input from educators, parents, community agency representatives, state agency representatives, and business/industry leaders.

All information that the Task Force has received indicates that the needs of at-risk children and youth are many, complex, and profound and reach far beyond education. The question becomes one of how to solve this problem.

In formulating its final report, the Task Force recognizes that North Carolina has taken some important steps to respond to the unmet needs of at-risk children and youth. The State Board of Education recently adopted a definition to assist in

identifying the population and, therefore, in better recognizing the types and range of services needed. The Task Force supports this definition which identifies at-risk children and youth as

> "young people who, because of a wide range of personal, familial, or academic circumstances, may experience school failure or unwanted outcomes unless there is intervention to reduce the risk factors. The following are among the primary factors that may identify these children: school performance at two or more years below grade level; CAT scores below the 25th percentile; academic failure; non-promotion (being older than classmates); truancy; substance abuse; delinquency; disinterest in school; low self-esteem; learning disabilities; physical, mental or emotional handicaps; physical or mental health problems; physical or sexual abuse; pregnancy; unstable home environment/family trauma; family income at or below the poverty level; negative parental attitudes toward school; low parental educational attainment; frustration of unchallenged giftedness and unrecognized talents; and limited English proficiency."

In addition to this definition, North Carolina, in recent years, has initiated many programs for at-risk children and youth through the Basic Education Program. These initiatives include the dropout prevention and students at risk program, the summer school and remediation programs, and a pilot program for preschool screening. The Task Force supports full funding of the Basic Education Program to provide a solid foundation for all students through the requested additional instructional and support personnel; however, the Task Force recognizes that much remains to be done to address the specific needs of at-risk children and youth.

The Task Force believes that the solution to meeting the many and varied needs of this special population lies in providing guarantees that these children and youth will receive the services necessary for educational success. Further, it is the belief of this Task Force that these guarantees can be provided only through the cooperative efforts of school, government, family, business/industry, and the community. North Carolina must maximize the potential of its most valuable and precious natural resource--its children.

The recommendations in this report significantly strengthen the ongoing efforts of the State and emphasize the fact that students at risk are not the problem. The problem is a societal and an educational structure that has too long failed our children and continues to place them at risk; therefore, North Carolina is placed at risk. These children have the right to be served adequately. If the ap-

propriate government agencies and community organizations implement these recommendations, North Carolina can guarantee the promise of a brighter tomorrow to its children and youth than they have today.

Based on input received and its commitment to the needs of the estimated 325,000 (nearly one in three) at-risk children and youth in the North Carolina public schools, the Task Force makes the following recommendations.

Recommendations

Educational Needs of At-Risk Children and Youth:

Guarantee the appropriate educational and related services needed by at-risk children and youth.

The Task Force believes that all public school children and youth in North Carolina are entitled to have meaningful options upon completion of high school so that they can be productive workers and effective citizens. Children should be guaranteed discreet delivery of these services to avoid the unnecessary negative stigma often associated with risk factors.

- *Preschool programs for three- and four-year olds* - Most experts agree that prevention of problems through early intervention is more effective, has a greater impact, and is ultimately less expensive than later intervention. Research indicates that early efforts toward prevention result in fewer dropouts, fewer incarcerations, and lower rates of unemployment. Researchers also conservatively estimate that for every $1 spent on prevention, $7 can be saved in later services. The Task Force supports a developmentally appropriate preschool model which would include a wide range of settings and would be available universally to both disadvantaged and nondisadvantaged children. Such a model must adhere to educational and developmental standards established through the Department of Public Instruction and the Department of Human Resources relative to early childhood development, increasing the likelihood that these children will attain academic and social success upon entering and progressing through school.

- *Early identification of all children and youth at risk of academic or social failure or unwanted outcomes* - While prevention is needed at the preschool age, changes (academic, social, health, and family) that negatively affect a child's life can occur at any time. Continuous awareness of a child's circumstances is necessary to ensure delivery of intervention at the earliest and most relevant point.

- *Learning style assessment* - The Task Force endorses periodic assessment of children for adjustment of instructional techniques to accommodate changes in a child's learning style.

- *Personal education plan* - A personal education plan, consistent with the learning style assessment and developed to meet a child's individual needs, can ensure delivery of appropriate services.

- *Alternative programs with individualized curricula* - Alternative programs allow a school to meet the different learning needs and styles of children. These programs must offer challenging and stimulating curricula appropriately taught in a setting conducive to a child's learning style.

Allow program and funding flexibility for school systems to meet their unique needs while requiring evaluation based on student and school outcomes.

North Carolina is a diverse state, geographically and demographically. All school systems cannot operate in the same way and with the same restrictions and meet the unique and individual needs of their students. The Task Force urges that the State Board of Education and the Department of Public Instruction allow program and funding flexibility to provide school systems the opportunity to use funds and implement programs best suited to the needs of their children. Required funding of mandatory in-school suspension programs in all high schools is a good example of restrictions that might be removed. In addition to such flexibility, however, the Task Force also supports a system of school accountability for student outcomes as a measure of program success. Such measures may include attendance rates, participation in school activities, promotion rates, achievement test scores, graduation rates, increased enrollment in college preparatory courses, and adherence to accreditation standards.

Provide before- and after-school programs for all children.

Students in grades K-9 (ages 5-15) have the right to be cared for in a safe place and with proper supervision. Many youth, due to lack of available programs or inability of their parent(s) to pay for these programs, are left alone before or after school and often at both times. School can be an ideal site for the care of children--a site that offers a positive developmental atmosphere in a safe, secure place.

Encourage participation in the vocational education curriculum by all students.

Vocational education programs provide students basic occupational skills and information that are relevant to their lives outside the classroom, thus preparing them for the world of work both in skills training and job expectations. Students become actively involved with the program by nature of the curriculum. The Task Force believes that participation in the vocational program, in addition to a core academic curriculum, could have a significant impact on all youth during the high school years when life and work skills development can be critical. The Task Force also supports integrating the academic and vocational curricula to reinforce skills in both areas and recommends that all teachers be prepared to relate students' learning experiences to the world of work.

Strengthen the skills of teachers and other staff with needed pre-service and in-service education.

Teachers and staff often begin their career with little or no formal preparation for working with at-risk children and youth. The Task Force strongly supports staff development programs that will focus on providing staff with the skills and knowledge needed to understand and serve all children. It further recommends that university programs in teacher education, counseling, social work, and other related areas be modified to meet this need.

Strengthen the compulsory attendance laws.

Recent information on dropouts collected by the Department of Public Instruction indicates that almost 14% of the reported dropouts in 1987-88 were below the age of 16. The Task Force recommends a thorough review of all laws and policies related to compulsory attendance for modifications that will make them more relevant and effective in today's environment. Allowing children to drop out of school at the age of 16 while spending millions of dollars annually to keep them in school is sending mixed signals. The Task Force strongly encourages establishment of an effective structure for communication between schools and the judicial system.

Fund a dropout prevention and students at-risk coordinator position for every local education agency.

The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction estimates that more than one in three of our public school students is at risk of academic and social failure when necessary services are not provided. Every LEA should be guaranteed at least one full-time staff member whose sole function shall be the delivery of services to and/or on behalf of at-risk children and youth. Planning an adequate program that will provide the diverse services needed by this population requires the focused, undivided attention of a full-time staff member unencumbered by other duties.

Restrict work hours of students under the age of 18.

The Task Force supports restricting the number of hours and the lateness of the hours that a student can work on a day preceding a school day. All students need adequate time for homework, relaxation, family time, and rest to ensure that their opportunities for success are not compromised. Research indicates that unrestricted work time reduces the likelihood of a child's success in school if he/she works excessive hours. Until such restrictions are enacted into law, the Task Force encourages employers to cooperate with students and school officials in establishing appropriate and reasonable work schedules.

Examine the NCDPI resources currently related to dropout prevention and at-risk children and youth.

The Task Force encourages careful examination of the current resources within the Department of Public Instruction directed toward programs for dropout prevention and at-risk children and youth to assure that adequate support can be provided to local education agencies.

Encourage the State Board of Education to reconsider the ten-day rule for its negative impact on keeping students in school.

State Board of Education policy currently requires a school system to drop a student from membership after ten consecutive unexcused absences. There is some indication that this ten-day rule negatively impacts students, increasing the

number of dropouts. Given the pressures associated with their many duties, school officials might not vigorously pursue the reinstatement of students who have been dropped from the membership roles.

Encourage the public schools and the community colleges to collaborate in follow-up and placement of students who withdraw from school.

General Statute 115C-47(32) requires that all students who drop out of regular high school programs be referred to an appropriate alternative program in the local school system. If one is not available, the student must be referred to the community college system. The Task Force strongly encourages the public schools and the community colleges to develop an effective system for tracking students who have dropped out of school and to collaborate in follow-up of students who have been referred to community colleges. Enrollment in and completion of appropriate programs at a community college is the critical next step for a large number of students and can be the key to the future for many students at risk.

Other Needs of At-Risk Children and Youth and Their Families:

Implement parenting skills programs and programs for parent participation.

A parent is the child's first teacher, and all parents can benefit from information on how they can better assist their children in learning. Programs to provide such information should be made available to new parents and should include home visits, as found in Missouri's Parents as Teachers program. These visits provide information on child development and parenting; group meetings offer peer support and sharing of ideas among parents. Providing such information and services to new parents of young children pays off substantially as a preventive measure. Children of families who receive such services are ahead of those who receive no such service, regardless of socioeconomic status. The Task Force also strongly encourages developing programs and incentives that will provide a parent more opportunities to play an active role in a child's life throughout the school years.

Establish a formal network of schools and public agencies to facilitate serving "the whole child."

The needs of at-risk children and youth extend greatly beyond the resources of the school. Related services needed may include health, social, legal, and mental health services, as well as others. There is seldom one agency or advocate that is aware of a child's total needs and that can facilitate the flow of services to the child. The Task Force recommends that a student advocate system be developed with school involvement as a means of ensuring appropriate and timely service of a child's related needs. An advocacy system might include coordinating such services as transportation, education, health and other identified needs.

Community Support of At-Risk Children and Youth:

Encourage the development of a system for schools, businesses, communities, and child-serving agencies to cooperate in serving at-risk children and youth.

Communities (including churches, business, industry, and civic groups) want to help schools and children; however, they frequently do not know how to help through any means other than monetary contributions. The Task Force recommends development of a system to facilitate services to children and to educate communities on the issues facing at-risk students; such a system could be the vehicle to promote understanding and to replace the notion of "those children" with the reality of "our children." Adopt-a-school programs, mentoring programs, and public/private compacts are examples of concepts that have been used successfully in some schools and communities.

Encourage employers to accommodate parents' needs to be an active part of their children's educational development.

Many parents do not participate in their children's school activities due to work schedules, lost wages for time off, and a fear of employer disapproval. Studies show that positive parent involvement enhances a child's school performance and attitude. The Task Force strongly encourages employers to allow parents time to participate in their children's educational activities. It also encourages schools and businesses to collaborate in the development of services to be delivered at the work site.

Conclusion

Every year in North Carolina more than 20,000 high school students drop out of school before graduation; at least one in four ninth graders in North Carolina does not graduate. According to a Duke University study, approximately $3.73 billion of lost economic activity is incurred for each graduating class; the study further indicates tax revenue loss alone is estimated at $450 million per class due to young people dropping out of school. These losses are but a part of the impact when considering the probability that dropouts will likely experience a frustrating lifetime of low wages and periodic or prolonged unemployment. They are also more likely to become involved with the judicial system through violent crime and substance abuse or to become dependent on welfare. The problem of academic underachievement is at the root of our inability to compete internationally with countries whose graduation rates are significantly higher than ours.

North Carolina cannot afford to lose another child to a nonproductive, noncontributing lifetime. All children can learn. All children have the right to every opportunity to develop their academic and social skills. While these recommendations represent a costly approach, it will be much less expensive than the consequence of our failure to guarantee these rights. But beyond the dollars, we are talking about children who have no control over their life's circumstances. Their only hope is a hand held out to us for help, a hand we cannot refuse. It is their right to expect to leave our schools well-prepared to be productive workers and effective citizens. We cannot let them down.